DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 294 673 PS 017 348

TITLE	National Cutoff Date for Students Entering Kindergarten or First Grade. Promoting State Legislation.
INSTITUTION	National Education Association, Washington, D.C. Div. of Instruction and Professional Development.
PUB DATE	[87]
NOTE	29p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Education Association, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20036 (free).
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Change; Educational Policy; Educational Research; *Grade 1; *Kindergarten; *Kindergarten Children; Preschool Education; Primary Education; *School Entrance Age
IDENTIFIERS	National Education Association

ABSTRACT

The National Education Association prepared this booklet on school entrance age because the association feels that the issue of a national cutoff date for entrance to kindergarten is perhaps the least controversial, most popular, and easiest educational reform issue to promote. The first part of the booklet: (1) provides information that supports a national September 1 cutoff date; (2) presents arguments that NEA state affiliates can use to frame the issues; (3) cites related NEA policies; (4) lists key people and organizations that affiliates might call on for support and supplementary information; and (5) provides nine references. Remaining materials include: (1) a discussion of pupil age at school entrance; (2) a consideration of the question of whether preschool is too much too soon; and (3) a table on kindergarten staff characteristics prepared by the Education Commission of the States. Also included is a table listing school entrance age dates for each of the United States and the District of Columbia. (SKC)

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Promoting State Legislation for

A National Cutoff Date for Students Entering Kindergarten or First Grade

PS 017343

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Introduction

THE 1987 NEA REPRESENTATIVE Assembly adopted a New Business Item which reads as follows:

The NEA, through its state affiliates, will urge its locals to seek state legislation to establish September 1 as the national cutoff date for students entering kindergarten or first grade. This action will require that the student be five or six, respectively, on or before September 1. (1987-58)

Early childhood education is high on everyone's educational reform agenda. There are several issues under consideration, but a national cutoff date for entrance to kindergarten or first grade is perhaps the least controversial, most popular, and easiest issue to promote.

This booklet provides information about issues that support a national September 1 cutoff date, presents arguments that NEA state affiliates can use to frame the issues, cites related NEA policies, and lists key people and organizations that affiliates might call on for support and supplementary information.

Issues Related to a Cutoff Date

The Statistics: Young Children and Working Mothers

THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN entering kindergarten increased by 8.2 percent between 1980 and 1984. It is anticipated that the increase will be 17 percent by 1990, when the under-six population is expected to be 23 million (8).

In 1986, 59.9 percent of the mothers of 3- to 5-year-old children were in the labor force, almost three fourths of them on a full-time basis. In two-parent households, 58.4 percent of the mothers of 3- to 5-year-olds were working. For divorced and separated mothers, the corresponding figures were 79.1 and 63.2 percent respectively. Among White mothers of 3- to 5-year-olds, 58.7 percent were in the labor force in 1986, an increase from 42.7 percent in 1975. For Black mothers the increase was less marked—from 58.81 percent in 1975 to 62.21 percent in 1986. Among Hispanic mothers, the rate remained stable—47.11 percent in 1975 and 48.51 percent in 1986 (7).

Issues

1. As more women enter the work force, there will be increased pressure for putting their children in school as early as possible.

2. Pressure for having children under 6 years old in school goes across racial and economic lines.

Excessive Pressure on Children to Achieve

David Elkind (2), professor of child study at Tufts University, warns of the dangers of moving an educational program intended for 5-year-olds down to an infant school or nursery school level. The long-range impact of these curricular decisions on a child's emotional stability in the later school years may be such that the child will lose interest in learning and could, in fact, develop a learning disability. Elkind observes that the "super kid" phenomenon extends beyond schools to parents who are being barraged by commercial advertisements and products that promise to make their children geniuses in short order.

Edward Zigler (9), Sterling Professor of psychology at Yale University, in arguing for universal preschool, says that having preschool in all public schools would better integrate children across socioeconomic lines and would introduce equity into early childhood programs. He also agrees with Elkind's concerns: "The image of the four-year-old trundling off to school in designer jeans, miniature briefcase in hand, may seem cute, but going from cradle to school denies children the freedom to develop at their own pace."

Samuel Sava (4), executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, has said that "the surest way to discredit early childhood education is to forget

that young human beings have many types of lessons to learn, not all related to IQ."

Issues

1. The pressures many parents feel to have "super kids" may cause them to want to enroll their children in kindergarten before the children are ready to benefit from the program.

2. Decisions being made about curricular offerings in both preschool and kindergarten have little to do with what is known about developmentally appropriate behaviors of 4-, 5-, and 6-year-olds.

Research

Uphoff and Gilmore (7) summarized the research on pupil age at school entrance and the impact of entrance age on achievement. They say that—

- Chronologically older children in a grade tend to receive many more above-average grades than do younger children in the same grade.
- The older children are much more likely to score above average on standardized achievement tests.
- The younger children are far more likely to have failed at least one grade.
- The younger children are far more likely to have been referred for learning disabilities tests and diagnosed as being learning disabled.
- Academic problems of younger children who were developmentally unready when they entered school can last throughout their school careers and sometimes even into adulthood.

Uphoff and Gilmore's article, "Pupil Age at School Entrance—How Many Are Ready for Success?", is reproduced in this booklet, on pages 11-15.

Sarah Glazer (3) has summarized the debate among child development specialists about whether preschoolers should be taught reading and other academic subjects. She reports that Lillian Katz, a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana, acknowledges there is an enormous amount of research today that we didn't have twenty years ago but believes it may have been misinterpreted. "It doesn't say children should be doing academic work early, [although] it does say their minds could be engaged early." Glazer's article, "Preschool: Too Much Too Soon?", is also reproduced in this booklet, on pages 16-26.

The Education Commission of the States (1) has published a chart which lists the variations in cutoff dates among the states. The chart is reproduced on pages 27-28. Glazer (3) included a similar listing in her article (see page 25). Although there is movement toward the September 1 cutoff date, it is slow.

Issues

1. The research supports experts' concerns about the long-range impact of placing children in kindergarten at too early an age.

2. The data show that there is a wide variety of cutoff dates among the states.

Quality Programs

Schweinhart and Koshel (5), in a High/Scope Foundation policy paper on preschool programs, say that—

> *It is important to spend enough per child to ensure that early childhood programs are of high quality, since the quality of these programs can affect children for the rest of their lives. A high quality program maintains groups of no more than 20 children and a staff-child ratio of at least 1 adult for every 10 children. It employs staff members who are adequately trained in early childhood development, uses a curriculum model based on child development principles and with demonstrated effectiveness, fosters collaboration between teaching staff and parents, and is sensitive to children's health and nutrition needs and families' child care needs.*

Issues

1. It is not sufficient simply to provide early childhood programs. They must be quality programs.

2. A key aspect of a quality early childhood program is that the curriculum model must be based on child development principles and have demonstrated effectiveness.

Framing the Issues for Association Advocacy

THREE ARGUMENTS CONSISTENT with Association policy and with the literature are recommended for advocating a national cutoff date:

- *Mobility.* As more women enter and remain in the work force, we can anticipate their need for or interest in moving the family in order to improve their careers or monetary status. Further, projections of changes brought about through an evolving technological society suggest a far more mobile work force. Futurists anticipate that individuals will make several career changes during their working life which could in turn call for two or three moves during their children's school years.
- *Public School Preschools.* The NEA believes that it is in the best interest of young children and the community to provide preschool programs for 4-year-olds in lieu of letting children begin kindergarten too early. A September 1 cutoff date would be the first step in that direction. Pressure to enroll children in kindergarten at too early an age often is a sign of the community's need for school experiences for their young children. It is the responsibility of the profession to determine the range of classes that should be offered. The NEA advocates programs for 4-year-olds in response to community needs.
- *Developmentally Appropriate Curricula.* NEA policy is very clear that young children should be enrolled in programs with an appropriate developmental curriculum. The support by experts, researchers, and organizations for such a position is enormous. Allowing children too young for a traditional kindergarten to enter such a class flies in the face of the advice of psychologists and educators alike. The more homogeneous the age range of the children, the more likely the opportunity to provide child development-oriented programs.

Related Association Policies

THE FOLLOWING NEA policies can be cited in support of legislation to establish a September 1 cutoff date:

Resolution C-3. Early Childhood Development and Kindergarten

The National Education Association strongly supports the inclusion of prekindergarten childhood education programs within the public school system. These programs should include child care, child development, appropriate developmental curriculum, and special education. The Association further supports kindergarten programs that are developmentally appropriate and that adequately prepare the child for transition into first grade. The Association urges that federal legislation be enacted to assist in funding and organizing the implementation of such programs.

The Association believes that early childhood programs must be staffed by trained and certified personnel and trained support staff. It supports training programs that will lead to credentials consistent with the educational standards in each state. The Association recommends that minorities, the poor, and the elderly be recruited to work in such programs.

The Association advocates the establishment of fully funded, early childhood special education programs. These programs should be readily accessible, make available those services necessary to assist handicapped children from birth, and be staffed by certified teachers, qualified support staff, and therapists.

The Association urges its affiliates to seek legislation to ensure that early childhood developmental programs offered primarily through the public schools be fully funded and available on an equal basis and culminate in mandatory kindergarten with compulsory attendance. The Association supports regulations requiring students starting kindergarten to have reached five years of age by September 1 of that year. (75, 87).

Action Plan for Educational Excellence

Principle 4. Learning should occur throughout life. Appropriate opportunities for learning must be available in all school districts for all age groups.

NEA Legislative Program—Third Tier

Early Childhood Development
NEA supports—

- *Early childhood development and education services provided by certified personnel for all children with access assured regardless of income as a critical element of educational excellence.*
- *Requirements that development programs meet educational, health, and safety standards.*
- *Creation and maintenance of a national data base on early childhood care and education.*

Resources

THERE ARE A NUMBER of organizations and individuals that can be sources of support in efforts to establish a September 1 cutoff date in the state.

State-Level Associations for Coalition Building

The national organizations listed below have state affiliates/chapters which should be willing to lend support to a legislative initiative. Contact the state arm of the—

National Association of Elementary School Principals

National Association for the Education of Young Children

American Psychological Association

National Association of Social Workers

American Pediatric Association.

Expert Witnesses

The following experts have been outspoken on the cutoff date issue. They may be willing to provide written testimony or may be available to provide oral testimony on behalf of the legislation.

Marian Wright Edelman
Children's Defense Fund
122 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20001

David Elkind
Professor of Child Development
Tufts University
Medford, Massachusetts 02155

W. Norton Grubb
Center for Policy Research
Research and Improvement
U.S. Department of Education
Washington, D.C. 20202

Lawrence Schweinhart
High/Scope Educational Research Foundation
600 N. River Street
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198

Marilyn Smith
National Association for the Education of Young Children
1834 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20008

James K. Uphoff
Professor of Education
Wright State University
Dayton, Ohio 45431

Edward Zigler
Professor of Psychology
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut 06520

Information

The following sources may have information or publications that would be useful in promoting a September 1 cutoff date:

Children's Defense Fund
122 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20001

Bank Street College of Education
610 W. 112th Street
New York, New York 10025

ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Urbana, Illinois 61801

High/Scope Educational Research Foundation
600 N. River Street
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198

National Black Child Development Association
1463 Rhode Island Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20005

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3. Glazer, Sarah. "Preschool: Too Much Too Soon?" *Editorial Research Reports* 1: 54-65; February 5, 1988. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc.)

4. Sava, Samuel. "The Right to Childhood." *Principal,* Vol. 64, 1985.

5. Schweinhart, Lawrence, and Koshel, Jeffrey. *Policy Options for Preschool Programs.* High/Scope Early Childhood Policy Paper No. 5. Ypsilanti, Mich.: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1986.

6. Uphoff, James K., and Gilmore, June. "Pupil Age at School Entrance—How Many Are Ready for Success?" *Educational Leadership* 43: 86-90; September 1985.

7. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Half of Mothers with Children Under 3 Now in Labor Force." Washington, D.C.: the Bureau, August 1986.

8. U.S. Senate, Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families. *Demographic and Social Trends: Implications for Federal Support of Dependent Care Services for Children and the Elderly.* Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1984.

9. Zigler, Edward. "Should Four-Year-Olds Be in School?" *Principal* 65: 10; May 1986.

Pupil Age at School Entrance—How Many Are Ready for Success?

James K. Uphoff and June Gilmore

(Reprinted from *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 43, No. 1, September 1985, by permission of the publisher, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA.)

MANY WELL-MEANING but ill-informed parents and educators are pushing young children into our school systems too soon. Being bright and being ready to begin formal schooling are two very separate issues. When children enter school before they are developmentally ready to cope with it, their chances for failure increase dramatically.

Research on Academic Success of Early Entrants

Much of the research we will review compares elementary school children who at the time they entered school were less than five years three months of age when enrolled in kindergarten or six years three months when enrolled in 1st grade (often called "summer children" because their birthdays fall between June and September) with children who were as much as six years three months old at kindergarten entrance or seven years three months when they started 1st grade. To summarize this research very briefly:

1. The chronologically older children in a grade tend to receive many more above-average grades from teachers than do younger children in that grade.

2. Older children also are much more likely to score in the above-average range on standardized achievement tests.

3. The younger children in a grade are far more likely to have failed at least one grade than are older children.

4. The younger children in a grade are far more likely to have been referred by teachers for learning disabilities testing and subsequently have been diagnosed as being learning disabled than are older students in a grade.

5. The academic problems of younger children who were developmentally unready at school entrance often last throughout their school careers and sometimes even into adulthood.

For example, a study of 278 pupils in the Hebron, Nebraska, Elementary School (Uphoff, 1985) found that 23 percent of the population had birthdays between June 1 and October 15, the cutoff date for that state. Another 9 percent were born in the same time period but had been held back for one year before starting school. The youngest group (summer children: SC) made up 75 percent of the school's failure population, while none of the held-back summer children (HBSC) had failed a grade. That study also found that al-

though the SC had a higher average IQ (girls, 115; boys, 107) than the HBSC (girls, 101; boys, 100), the latter group achieved the same (boys) or higher (girls) average cumulative percentile scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Thus, the less bright but older and developmentally more mature pupils were able to do more with the ability they had than were the brighter, younger students.

One explanation could be that the SC girls were found to be off-task more than three times as often during large-group mathematics classes as the HBSC girls. For boys the gap in attentiveness was smaller but still significant; younger ones were off-task almost twice as much as older boys. Also of interest was the finding that the "middle-agers" fell into the median range of off-task behavior, thus indicating a direct correlation between pupil age and ability to be attentive.

A longitudinal study in Wapakoneta, Ohio, compared summer children who had started school when first eligible with those whose parents delayed their start by one year (Gilmore, 1984). All pupils had completed at least 3rd grade and some 6th grade, so four to seven years of data were available. Figure 1 clearly shows how grade-level equivalent scores on the Iowa Test favored the older, more mature pupils.

Gilmore also examined all teacher-assigned grades, which often include pupil maturity (cooperation, attitude, effort, and so on) as a factor. Again, the results favored the older pupils who were more ready for school when they started. Sixty percent of the SC girls and 100 percent of the HBSC girls received above-average grades, as did 47 percent of the SC boys and 81 percent of the HBSC boys.

Huff (1984) reported that a group of "at-risk" children identified in a 1980 kindergarten readiness assessment in Fairbrook Elementary (Beavercreek, Ohio) were followed as they progressed through the grades. Fifteen parents had delayed their child's start by one year; 21 had not. Using early 2nd grade test data (2.0 = on target) from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, Huff found that the delayed starters had a cumulative grade-level equivalent score of 2.6, while the early starters had reached only the 2.1 level. The other key factor was that because 15 of the 21 early starters had been retained at least once, the younger group had been in school an average of six months more to achieve five months less than the older group.

In a study of all 154,000 pupils in the Hawaii Schools, where December 31 is the cutoff date for school entrance, Diamond (1983) found that December-born children were twice as likely to have been diagnosed as specifically learning disabled as were the January-born pupils.

Finally, a study of 11th grade honor English students focused on the results of their work on a nine-week term paper project. The papers were evaluated carefully following a detailed analysis plan (an average of 65 minutes per paper). Of the 34 students, 71 percent of the oldest seven earned an "A" while only 14 percent of the youngest seven students received the same grade. All were bright, but some—the youngest—lacked the self-discipline and maturity to perform up to capacity (Uphoff, 1984).

Figure 1. Comparison of Grade-Level Equivalent Scores of Summer Children and Held-Back Summer Children on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

Grade-Level Equivalent Score Levels	Boys		Girls	
	SC	HSBC	SC	HSBC
Above Average	27%	79%	22%	71%
Average	33%	8%	50%	29%
Below Average	40%	13%	28%	0%

SC = Summer Children (early starters)
HBSC = Held Back Summer Children (delayed starters)

Damaging Consequences Documented in Other Areas

The problem of early entrance has grown worse since 1957, when Sputnik provided the impetus for the "curriculum shove-down," which has resulted in kindergarten now teaching much of what used to be presented in the first grade. However, researchers have been aware of the problem for years.

As a result of his study of 500 K-12 pupils in Montclair, New Jersey, Forester (1955) reported that:

> *. . . .those pupils who were very bright but very young at the time of school entrance did not realize their potential. They tended to be physically immature or emotionally unstable, or they would cry easily. And socially, they seldom showed leadership. From junior high school on, 50 percent of them earned only "C" grades. On the other hand, generally the very bright late-school-entrance group excelled throughout their school careers. . .in many cases early entry may result in maladjustment in school, and even may have an adverse effect on adult life.*

Mawhinney (1964) reported on why the Grosse Point, Michigan, Schools abandoned an early entrance program for very bright children as a result of data obtained from their 14-year longitudinal study. The results:

1. Nearly one-third of early entrants turned out to be poorly adjusted.

2. Only one-twentieth of early entrants were judged to be outstanding leaders at the end of the experiment.

3. Nearly three out of four were considered entirely lacking in leadership.

> *Approximately one in four of the very bright early school entrants was either below average in school or had to repeat a grade.*

Gott (1963) studied 171 California children who were about four years nine months of age at school entrance (Group A) and another 171 who were about a year older when they entered school (Group B). All were ranked on a 10-point scale measuring socioemotional development. Four times as many A's and B's were in the lowest rank. According to records and faculty reports, Group B pupils were judged higher on leadership than the younger entrants.

In presenting the pros and cons of required preschool for all children, Soderman (1984) notes the "cognitive sifting down" of the curriculum over the past years. She observes that:

> *Children at 4 and 5 . . . have a genuine need to play, and the quality and quantity of the time they spend playing are later seen (or observed) to be lacking in their creative thought, ability to make decisions, and potential for coping with stressful situations. . . .The American Academy of Pediatricians has expressed concern about the dramatic increase of "stress-related" symptoms being seen in young children.*

Campbell (1984), head of the bureau of child development at the New York State Department of Education, says that demanding kindergartens create too much stress for the youngsters and can have damaging consequences. Phi Delta Kappa's Practical Application of Research concludes in its summary:

> *At present, teacher agendas and ideologies about what adults think children ought to be learning ("reading readiness" at age 3!) result in inappropriate and deficient experiences for children.*

Knowing of such results as these and of the major increase in youth suicides in America over the past 20 years (about the time the curriculum was "sifted downward"), we decided to conduct a pilot study (Uphoff and Gilmore, 1984) in Montgomery County, Ohio. We studied all youth suicides (25 years of age and under) occurring in 1983 and during the first half of 1984. Summer children make up almost 35 percent of total births per year in Ohio. Of the male youth suicides, at least 45 percent were summer children; when the October- and November-born males who started school even younger are added to the figures, the percentage increases to 55. The percentage of female suicides who had been summer children was a startling 83 percent.

Should these figures continue to hold when a larger study is concluded, the message is very strong and clear for educators and parents. Perhaps Ames and Ilg (1979) captured it best when they wrote:

Birthday or chronological age is no guarantee of readiness for school. Our position is that the child's behavior age, not his birthday age, should determine the time of school entrance and of subsequent promotion.

Possible Actions

That a problem exists is quite clear. Fortunately, there are several possible ways to reduce the magnitude of the "unready" child's problem.

First, states can change the cutoff date for school entrance; in fact, one-third have already done so. In the last decade at least 17 states have moved their cutoff date from late fall-early winter to much earlier in the fall or even late summer. For example, in 1980 the date in Kentucky was December 31 (must be age five on or before); it is now October 1. Oklahoma changed from November 1 to September 1 in 1980. West Virginia did the same in 1983.

Swartz and Black (1981) have been working for years to get Illinois to change its starting date from December 1 to September 1. Their study of learning disabled children in West Central Illinois found a normal distribution of birthdates for school entrance "except for the September to November quarter which was 71 percent higher." They conclude that "an adjustment in school entrance age can be viewed as proactive and one that considers only research and sound educational principles."

A second possible action is for schools to use a well-designed pupil developmental assessment process to determine children's readiness to enter kindergarten or to be promoted to 1st grade. Such a screening process takes time, personnel, and equipment, but may be well worth the effort.

Third, parents could hold their "too young" children for another year before entering them in school. The right kinds of preschool or head start programs (play emphasized) and good home enrichment experiences are often very helpful and prevent undue stress, frustration, and failure. The Ypsilanti Head Start longitudinal study clearly shows that such preschool programs with play as the vehicle for learning make a big difference later on (Hansen, 1984).

Fourth, schools could "kick the curriculum back upstairs"where it used to be. Parents in Racine, Wisconsin, are pushing their schools to reduce academic pressure in the early grades. The experience of several European nations clearly shows that delaying the start of reading and mathematics instruction until all children are older (and many more are ready) helps all to learn better and faster. (Those that are truly ready to read earlier should, of course, be given the opportunity but not be pushed.)

A fifth consideration, and one chosen by many schools, is to assign developmentally unready children to a special kindergarten, pre-first grade, junior first grade, or similar program that offers five years of primary education instead of the more usual four (K-3) years. For example, Project First Chance (a special kindergarten) in the Lamar Consolidated School District (Rosenberg, Texas) uses the Arizona Behavior Analysis Criterion-Referenced Utilization Scale (ABACUS) through the University of Arizona Special Education Department. The Optional Kindergarten program of the West Des Moines Community Schools provides a planned prekindergarten program for "unready" five-year-olds. The Coldwater (Ohio) Schools have a half-day "preprimary" class for the 20-25 percent of children who were in kindergarten but are not ready to move on to the 1st grade. Other districts have full-day "junior first grades." A few even repeat the regular kindergarten.

Another alternative—repeating a grade—has been found to work well with many children under certain conditions. If failure is stressed—especially that of the child—the repeat will be less likely to produce positive results. However, when parents assume the burden and responsibility for the repeat, the odds of successful results are much improved. For example, the parents might explain to their child, "We goofed! We started you too early, and now we want you to have a chance to catch up with yourself so that learning can be fun and easier for you." Many researchers believe that the earlier in school a child repeats a grade, the greater the chances for long-range success.

Too Much Too Soon for Too Many

Obviously, the present situation has built-in expectations and requirements that are simply too much too soon for too many young children. *Newsweek's* 1983 cover story on "Bringing Up Superbaby" contends that intense ear-

ly learning is drawing fire from psychologists not only because it does not live up to its claims but also because it may impede other skills. The article quotes Craig Ramey of the University of North Carolina: "Pressure for academic achievement can take away something from other agendas such as the development of social skills." The article continues:

> *Even worse, early education may backfire. A sure prescription for trouble is making learning stressful. Scientists don't know exactly how information gets into the brain, but there are hints that experiences infused with unpleasant emotions never reach the memory banks. If an hour with the cue cards makes the child anxious, that lesson may never be learned—and future lessons will be less effective.*

Ilg and Ames (1951) of the Gesell Institute summarized the problem of the "unready" child when they observed, over 30 years ago, that too often we attack the child's attitude by saying, "He could do better if he would" when it would be more accurate to say, "He would do better if he could."

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Preschool: Too Much Too Soon?

Sarah Glazer

(Reprinted from *Editorial Research Reports*, February 5, 1988, by permission of the publisher, Congressional Quarterly, Inc., Washington, D.C.)

TODAY'S PARENTS WHO were of kindergarten age in the 1950s are often startled by the academic emphasis they find in the nursery schools and kindergartens their children attend. They remember their kindergartens as "playschools" full of blocks and toys. Today, almost any kindergarten—public or private—introduces beginning reading and writing skills to 5-year-olds.

That does not mean that all schools are alike. In one kindergarten, children may be learning to write on computers. In another they may be bowed over worksheets that test their knowledge of phonics. In yet others the emphasis may be much more low-key and much less strictly academic, with pupils forming letters from Play-doh or learning words from labels attached to windows, books and other objects around the classroom.

Behind these varied classroom approaches, a battle is raging over the correct philosophy of education for 4- and 5-year-olds. On one side of the debate are the developers of increasingly academic curricula for kindergartners. They maintain that children are eager to learn reading and math concepts at ages 4 and 5 and that an early start with such concepts will help them cope with school in later grades. For low-income children particularly, some proponents say, a formal "direct-instruction" technique may be essential to allowing them to start school with the same skills most middle-class children receive at home.

Attacking the formal-instruction approach are professional organizations representing nursery school teachers, child psychologists and pediatricians. They charge that formal academic studies for 4- and 5-year-olds stifle children's natural curiosity and need for free play, and create anxiety about failure that often shows up in physical symptoms of stress or in a later lack of interest in school.

"When we instruct children in academic subjects, or in swimming, gymnastics, or ballet, at too early an age, we miseducate them; we put them at risk for short-term stress and long-term personality damage for no useful purpose," writes psychologist David Elkind in *Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk*. "There is no evidence that such early instruction has lasting benefits and considerable evidence that it can do lasting harm." Elkind is president of the National Association for the Edu-

cation of Young Children, which has expressed fears that the increasing numbers of public schools opening classes to 4-year-olds will transfer an elementary school curriculum to young children for whom it is inappropriate. The association represents preschool teachers and others in the field.

When it comes to 4-year-olds, educators are split over whether academic subjects should be taught at all in the year before kindergarten, known in many places as "prekindergarten," or "pre-K." Many nursery schools around the country still provide the traditional play-oriented experience to 3- and 4-year-olds, and their adherents would like them to stay that way. By contrast, the kindergarten debate revolves not around whether academic studies should be taught to 5-year-olds, but around what kind of academic studies should be taught. Should kindergartens stick to "re-reading" programs, aimed at stimulating children's interest in reading and at giving them such basic rudiments as recognizing letters? That is the course Elkind recommends. Or should they introduce full-fledged reading and writing skills?

One of the proponents of a more formal approach to writing and reading for kindergartners is John Henry Martin, creator of the "Writing to Read" program marketed by IBM since 1984. Used in more than 3,000 schools, the program teaches reading and writing to children in kindergarten and first grade through the use of computers, electric typewriters and workbooks. Martin, a former nursery school director, attacks the "child development people" for promoting a "religious mythology" of child development that insists on postponing learning to read. In Martin's view, Elkind and other developmentally oriented educators "let children suffer from mental malnutrition."

Perhaps one cause of this philosophical schism in approaches to preschool education may be found in the location of the classrooms—at independent preschools, or as part of elementary schools. W. Norton Grubb, an education professor at the University of California at Berkeley, believes that, whether consciously or not, nursery school teachers tend to encourage a child-centered, laissez-faire approach to letting children explore at their own initiative. Elementary school teachers implicitly view children as empty vessels to be instructed formally through the rewards and punishments of grades.[1]

Developmentalists, Behaviorists Have Been Feuding 60 Years

This dispute between educators echoes a long-standing feud between "developmentalists" and "behaviorists" that has characterized American views of early education since the 1920s.

At one end of the spectrum, developmentalists like Elkind believe that at each stage of development children learn in ways markedly different from other stages. This understanding of children draws heavily on the observations of children made by the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget beginning in the 1920s. Piaget concluded that humans share specific, predictable approaches to understanding the world at each stage of mental growth. Piaget's work challenged the "environmentalist" view that child development was determined exclusively by the nurture, and not at all by the nature, of children. Rather, Piaget believed that intellectual development was determined by an interaction between the environment and the innate processes of the mind. For purposes of nursery school teaching, Piaget's followers stress that young children must learn through concrete experiences.

At the other end of the spectrum from the developmentalists are the behaviorists, whose work became increasingly influential in the 1960s. Their research stressed the ability of small children to learn discrete bits of information from a teacher rather than through free exploration, and concluded that children have much greater learning abilities at younger ages than had previously been thought. Studies by psychologist Carl Bereiter and philosopher Siegfried Engelmann suggested that accelerating the academic content of preschool for low-income children had positive results on their learning achievement. They developed "direct instruction," a carefully scripted question-and-answer technique to be used by the teacher.

Lilian G. Katz, a professor of early childhood education at the University of Illinois at Urbana, points to "the enormous amount of

research we have today that we didn't have 20 years ago on children's learning, which has great implications for what we're doing." The research, which started about 1970, revealed the impressive learning capacity of infants and young children. Nevertheless, Katz believes the research may have been misinterpreted. "It doesn't say children should be doing academic work early, [although] it does say their minds could be engaged early."

Katz says that many parents, taking seriously the admonition by educators that their children's education should be improved, assumed formal academic studies should be incorporated at an early age. As editor of *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, sponsored by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Katz speaks for the developmental school of thought when she says that preschool should be limited neither to play nor to formal academic exercises. "The ideal thing is that children should have some opportunity for pursuing spontaneous play, some opportunity for topics—going out and seeing things, drawing what you've seen and painting what you've seen. It's not random. By 4 and a half to 5, they should have some exposure to the basics on a very low-key, low-pressure level."

How prevalent is the academic focus in kindergarten and nursery school? No one has done a comprehensive nationwide survey of teaching approaches, but many education experts say that the academic approach is dominant. "I've been in an enormous number of schools this last year all over the country. What is amazing is how similar they are" in their formal academic focus, says Katz. "It looks as if the activities are determined by commercial paper-sellers [publishers of workbooks and worksheets]—the same ones all over."

Behaviorists Point to Benefits for Disadvantaged Children

Developmentalists of Katz' persuasion dominate the academic field of early childhood research, but many school principals and teachers are skeptical of the developmentalists' claims. They find more convincing several large-scale studies concluding that direct instruction improves the academic achievement of children from disadvantaged homes. Public school educators want to be able to show the outside world measurable and immediate results from their teaching techniques. "A lot of school districts, because of accountability, do incorporate some pre-academic work," says Cynthia Warger, director of professional development for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development in Alexandria, Va....

Warger says many teachers and principals find most persuasive the positive research results on the direct-instruction technique propounded by Douglas Carnine, a disciple of behaviorists Engelmann and Bereiter and currently associate professor of education at the University of Oregon. "Carnine has research to back up his approach," says Warger, who organized the association's...[recent] conference on preschool curricula for public schools. Public schools tend to be wary of Elkind and other child-development experts, says Warger, because they appear to be saying, "We don't have research. We just have theory. We shouldn't stick to what is measurable."

Although research of Engelmann and Bereiter is thought to have exerted a broad influence over teaching in this country since the 1960s, Carnine insists that it is intended exclusively for low-income children. The direct-instruction technique is probably used in its pure form in less that 2 percent of school programs across the country, he estimates. Because most of the new state initiatives to educate 4-year-olds are reserved for low-income children, public schools starting such preschool classes are likely to find his claims extremely relevant to their concerns....

"Our primary concern," says Carnine, "is economically at-risk children. We feel there needs to be a well-implemented academic component for these students. They start school at a disadvantage when they walk in the door because they haven't had the academic preparatory experiences at home, typically. The school environment has to provide, during part of the day, an attitude of catching these kids up so they can survive in the educational system.

The direct-instruction technique attempts to provide this through a prepared script used by the teacher. The script, which the teacher uses word for word, gives the students a familiarity with the kind of language the first-grade teather will use in formal instruction—something that should come naturally to the middle-class child from a literate background, Car-

nine says. The method also presents in simple terms the basic system of logic needed to sound out words and work out math problems. To Carnine, the developmentalists' insistence that 4- and 5-year-olds cannot absorb academic skills in a meaningful way only exacerbates the poor child's initial disadvantage.

As evidence of direct instruction's success, Carnine points to a study of more than 2,000 low-income children in Seattle schools who participated in a special program using the method. There, he says, direct-instruction graduates dropped out of high school at a lower rate than a comparable group without the direct-instruction experience (11 vs. 17 percent) and were placed in classes for gifted students at a rate that was the same for the school district as a whole.

Barbara Nielsen, coordinator of Seattle's direct-instruction program, speaks enthusiastically of the method, now in its 20th year in Seattle, where it was started by a group of low-income mothers calling themselves the Central Area Mothers for Peace and Improvement. In answer to criticisms that the method is focused too much on the teacher's role and not enough on the child's, Nielsen responds, "It gets misconstrued as if it's robotic, rote learning. I look at it as involvement with the teacher. It's a very verbal program; the kids' self-esteem is constantly being bolstered."

Two Academic Techniques; Hotly Debated Results

In the academic community, however, the direct-instruction technique is under fire. Critics charge it ignores the fundamentals of child development—the need for preschoolers to explore based on their own curiosity and to develop a sense of independence. A 1986 study conducted in Ypsilanti, Mich., concludes that graduates of direct-instruction preschools are significantly more antisocial by the time they reach adolescence than are peers who attended developmentally oriented preschools.[2]

The study tracked 68 low-income children considered at risk of failing in school. The children were randomly assigned at ages 3 and 4 to one of three high-quality preschools: a direct-instruction school, a traditional nursery school with lots of free play, or a school based on Piaget's theories, in which children planned their activities together with trained teachers. The authors of the High/Scope study make no secret of the fact that they prefer a Piaget-based approach; in fact, the Piaget-oriented preschool is named the High/Scope School after a curriculum that was developed at the researchers' own foundation. But they claimed that although they found similar increases in their students' IQ test scores over time from all the programs, at age 15 the graduates of the two developmentally oriented nursery schools reported engaging in only about half as many delinquent acts as the direct-instruction group. And compared with the direct-instruction graduates, alumni of the other two preschools reported only about one-fifth as many acts of violence, drug abuse and such family-related problems as fights with parents or running away from home.

Study authors Lawrence J. Schweinhart and David P. Weikart speculate that the direct-instruction approach fosters dependence at a time when children should be developing self-reliance and that it eventually leads to the kind of antisocial behavior they reported. "We're more and more seeing as the data come in that children develop a sense of self, independence, responsibility and wonder" at the preschool ages, says Weikart. Therefore, he says, it is much better to "have a 6-year-old who is curious about the world than a kid who knows his ABC's and isn't curious."

Not surprisingly, the High/Scope study has been fiercely attacked by advocates of the direct-instruction school. Douglas Carnine, the University of Oregon professor who is a leading proponent of direct instruction, points out that Weikart's data on crime and drug abuse are based on the graduates' own reports rather than objective statistics from police. In addition, he charges the study used much too small a sample on which to base a condemnation of direct instruction, especially when compared with the thousands of children who showed positive effects in Seattle.

In turn, High/Scope's Schweinhart criticizes the findings of success in Seattle as methodologically flawed because the group was self-selected—that is, the children holding the limited number of places in the direct-instruction program were there because their parents applied for them, suggesting that they came from families with a higher motivation for school achievement than most children in their income group. By contrast, High/Scope

randomly assigned children to different preschools.

Beyond the fights over proper methodology, however, Carnine and the High/Scope researchers differ over a troubling educational question: Is the optimistic, hands-off philosophy of the developmentalists as successful for low-income children as it is for middle-class children?

Carnine says that although he shares many of the developmentalists' views, their approach, if relied on exclusively, does not do enough for the child from a deprived home. "One of the big problems with at-risk kids is they're told they're not ready to learn yet. So [the schools] sit around and wait for them to grow older. This widens the learning gap" between low-income and middle-income children, Carnine says.

Miseducation author David Elkind is skeptical of the contention that direct instruction is appropriate for low-income children but not for middle-class children. "A good, healthy education is the same for all children....I wonder: Do you instill in children more rote, dependent learning styles, which are hard to get out of later? What seems to work well in the short range may have opposite effects in the long range...if it works toward having less self-esteem."...

Some early programs have been criticized both for making children anxious about whether they perform at the same level as their peers and for teaching in a style that is boring for the child. "Writing to Read" comes in for both criticisms from Elkind, although he contends that not all children react to it negatively. The computers, Elkind says, "leave no room for the child's input." Some educators report similar experiences. For example, one teacher in the program said that a student, having been told several times by the computer voice to repeat the word, "cat," screamed back at the impassive machine in a rage, "I already said 'cat.'" Said the teacher: "I wouldn't repeat it that many times, I would have more respect for the kids."

IBM, which markets the program, points to a positive evaluation conducted by the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, N.J., in July 1984. "By the end of the program," the study concluded, "72 percent of the students had progressed beyond word-level writing to the production of phrases, sentences and in 15 percent of the cases to developed writing, a level that is considerably in advance of normal expectations for beginning readers." Compared with similar populations that did not use "Writing to Read," kindergartners in the computer program tended to read at higher levels, but first-graders in both groups read at the same level, the study found.

Elkind says he has not been impressed by the statistics on children's achievement in "Writing to Read"; he charges that the program's proponents exaggerate small differences in achievement between participants and nonparticipants. Further, he says, the program's philosophy is not in keeping with the most recent approaches to reading, which attempt to make children excited about the content of books before teaching them the basic skills.

But John Henry Martin, the creator of "Writing to Read," insists his program is in line with the very same developmental theories of Piaget followed by Elkind. "I designed material that is harmonious with children's language development," he says. The mistake made by Elkind and other developmentalists, Martin says, is that "the mental development is set aside as a delayed function of social learning. I find such a view preposterous. Why is the proper feeding of a child's stomach right but the careful feeding of the child's brain wrong?"

Martin says he carefully designed his program to avoid the psychologically damaging aspects of competition and punishment for failure that characterize many formal academic programs. Although children progress at their own pace on 10 numbered workbooks for the year, teachers are specifically prohibited from charting children's progress on the class wall for other students to see. When a child makes a mistake on the computer, he notes, the computer does not admonish the child; the keyboard is simply frozen.

Developmentalists Are Split Over the Best Curriculum

Even among those who favor a developmental approach to educating young children, there are serious differences as to what kind of curriculum should be used. The traditional, play-oriented nursery school "where no-

body pushes" is the choice of Louise Bates Ames, co-director of the Gesell (pronounced Geh-ZELL) Institute of Child Development in New Haven, Conn., and the author of several popular books for parents on preschool children. Her ideal nursery school will sound familiar to most parents who grew up in the 1950s. It provides a warm social setting less intent on transmitting intellectual concepts than the schools favored by Piaget disciples Elkind and Katz. Such schools, she wrote in her 1974 book, *Don't Push Your Preschooler*, have been populated with "kind, friendly adults who understood each child's needs" but were not particularly interested in imparting a curriculum other than informally helping the child along with social skills.[3]

Although Ames agrees with Elkind's crusade against formal academic studies, she parts ways with him over his admiration of Montessori nursery schools. Montessori schools were developed for retarded children by Italian physician Maria Montessori in the early 1900s. They became increasingly popular among American middle-class families in the 1960s.

Elkind recommends Montessori because the teachers are well-trained and the materials are "very child-oriented." Ames believes the special materials make Montessori schools overly rigorous in their emphasis on children's mental development. The pure Montessori school limits most of its equipment to special devices developed by Maria Montessori for teaching skills related to reading, arithmetic and other aspects of cognition. Specially sized beads and cubes teach nursery school children to understand the composition of numbers into the thousands at impressively young ages. Working with easily manipulated sandpaper letters, Montessori children also can learn to recognize words at young ages. By running a finger over the rough sandpaper shape, Montessori believed, a child would comprehend through tactile experience the shapes that he eventually would need to reproduce letters of the alphabet in writing.

A pure Montessori classroom is likely to have children working independently or in pairs with materials they have removed from the shelves. The quiet atmosphere and concentration of the children is often a stark contrast to the rough-and-tumble play of a traditional nursery school. If the school follows Montessori's principles faithfully, it will not provide the trucks, dolls and similar toys found in the traditional American nursery school.

"A lot of quiet, small little girls do well in Montessori, but they need to be forced to get out and play and get dirty," says Ames. "They need more broadening. A tough boy would have a hard time" in the disciplined environment.

"I would definitely say that's not true," counters Kathy Armitage, director of affiliated schools for the American Montessori Society in New York, which has about 800 Montessori schools as members. "Montessori really is in response to the child....If a child happens to be a bouncing boy that needs more motor activity, we try to adapt that into the curriculum." Armitage, a former Montessori teacher, says that little boys who do not adapt well to a traditional classroom, in which children must sit down at the same time in groups, frequently respond well to Montessori, where the entire day is a form of choreographed free play.

Some Reasons Why Preschools Have Become Increasingly Academic

Differences of opinion over the kind of preschool a child should attend were once easily resolved in a choice made by middle-class parents among the nursery schools available. Today, those philosophical differences are part of a frequently bitter debate among educators as public schools take on increasing responsibilities for educating 4-year-olds.

Today, 23 states and the District of Columbia have public preschool programs for 4-year-olds (or have passed laws to implement them), although most are targeted at low-income children and have a limited number of spaces even for those who qualify....

Samuel G. Sava, executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, says the trend toward academic kindergartens and prekindergartens started about 10 years ago....The academic curriculum was driven, he believes, by the movement of more and more women into the work force, a corollary demand for day care, and state governments' tendencies to answer that need by passing legislation permitting public

school entry of children of 4 years of age.

According to Census Bureau statistics, the proportion of mothers of young children in the work force has increased dramatically over the last 20 years, as has the percent of young children placed in nursery schools or day care....

Where kindergarten could easily have been a middle-class 5-year-old's first formal schooling experience in the 1950s, today's 5-year-old from the same income group is likely to have been exposed to school-like activities for two years or more through day-care or nursery school. According to Census Bureau figures, by 1984, 84 percent of the 5-year-olds in the United States were enrolled in nursery school or kindergarten—proportionally, about 50 percent more than were enrolled in 1964.

Most of the research on the effects of preschool education to date has concentrated on low-income children. Ironically, the early, well-publicized success of preschool programs aimed at low-income children, such as the federal Head Start program, is one of the main reasons that middle-class parents sent their children to preschool in increasing numbers and expected their children to receive an academic beginning. Those parents misunderstood the significance of Head Start. So did many professionals in the field.

"Educators themselves misinterpreted the data from Head Start," says Sava. "People thought: Somehow, if a youngster learned to recite her ABCs by 3, she really had a 'head start' on all the youngsters and therefore one up on life."

But as researchers now stress, most of the long-term benefits of Head Start are not heavily academic; they are social in nature and primarily applicable to children from deprived homes. The Head Start programs provide the kinds of benefits—such as medical care and dental care and positive feelings of self-esteem—that middle-class children are likely to receive at home. While many of the early studies showed that low-income children in preschool experienced initial spurts in their scores on IQ and achievement tests, by second or third grade their scores tended to taper off and to show little difference from the test scores of children from similar backgrounds who had had no preschool experience.[4] A 1985 analysis of 20 years of research on Head Start concluded that the initial advantages shown on tests of the emotional benefits of the program, such as self-esteem and motivation to achieve, also disappeared over the long run. Some of the Head Start studies found, however, that former Head Starters were less likely to repeat grades or to be assigned to special education classes for remedial help.[5]

Interestingly enough, the advantages of preschool education for low-income children seem to show up again when the preschool graduates reach adolescence and young adulthood. They apparently have a superior ability to cope with school, life and work. These students, says Schweinhart, the High/Scope researcher, "bought into the school system more, because of their early positive experience" in preschool.

Schweinhart and High/Scope President Weikart are among the co-authors of a frequently cited study of low-income children who attended the Perry Preschool in Ypsilanti, Michigan.[6] The study, published in 1984, followed the school careers of 123 Black children from poor families in Ypsilanti, starting in 1962. The children were randomly assigned either to a group that attended the preschool or to a group that did not. By the time the graduates of the Perry Preschool were 19 years old, the study found, they were arrested less often than the non-preschool children, bore fewer illegitimate children, were more likely to be employed and less likely to be on welfare. More of them completed high school, more went on to postsecondary education, and fewer of them had been assigned to special-education classes to receive remedial help.

In contrast, says Weikart, "When we've looked at middle-class kids, preschool hasn't had much impact. They have other mechanisms for getting what they need....You [parents] read to them at home, they have temper tantrums to test limits, outside influences come into the home and you treat them as interesting and strange."

There have been only a few studies of the effect of preschool on middle-class children. One of them—in a combined preschool and parent-education program in Brookline, Mass.—concluded that middle-class graduates were less likely to read below grade level by the time they reached elementary school than were children of similar background who had not attended the program.[7]

"We still don't know about middle-class children and the effects of preschool education," says Carollee Howes, a professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of California at Los Angeles. Today, says Howes, "it's very hard to do research on it because essentially every middle-class kid has a preschool education"; there is no control group.

Academic Kindergartens Require Older Kindergartners

Concerns over the stresses placed on young children subjected to formal training are now being expressed outside the educational field. Late last year the American Academy of Pediatrics joined with principals and early childhood educators in issuing a public statement condemning formal curricula for preschoolers.

Dr. George M. Sterne, chairman of the American Academy of Pediatrics' early childhood committee, says he has observed two kinds of effects on children—"the physical symptoms associated with stress, like abdominal pain and sleep problems, and the more specific symptoms of burnout later. Kids are just getting totally turned off." Many of these symptoms are the result of overloaded, highly structured schedules for children, he believes. "We see children who literally don't have time for play. Play is the work of childhood. Organized activity takes away from the average child's rough-and-tumble hide-and-seek."

When parents try to force activities such as eating and toilet-training on children, notes Sterne, who is also clinical professor of pediatrics at Tulane Medical School, they set off a battle of wills that often results in the opposite effects—eating resistance in the first case and bowel retention in the second. It is similar with learning: "If learning becomes something that children do for the parents, it becomes another area of battle," he says.

Sterne blames a number of factors in addition to structured preschools on the increased stress he observes—extracurricular activities like infant gymnastics programs, parents' anxiety about private school entrance and TV ads claiming that children fail in college if they do not own such early learning aids as home computers.

Within individual schools, preschool teachers complain that they feel pressure from school administration and elementary school teachers in early grades to make the classes more academic. Sava of the Elementary School Principals Association worries that the public schools he represents will apply their traditional academic philosophy to the new 4-year-old students. "Many of our principals and teachers have never had any training in early childhood education. They would take the third-grade curriculum and water it down and use it for the 4-year-old children," he says.

As teachers and parents have come to recognize that the kindergarten of today requires increased maturity on the part of children, the debate has turned to such questions as the appropriate age of entrance to kindergarten and whether children should be tested to see if they are ready for the challenge ahead. Since 1975, 21 states (see chart...) have changed their birthday cutoff date to require that children be fully 5 years old when they enter kindergarten rather than permitting some 4-year-old children to enter in the fall and turn 5 in the course of the school year.

In another response to the demands of today's kindergarten, schools increasingly advise parents of 5-year-olds with summer birthdays—particularly boys—to keep their children out of kindergarten until they turn 6. Boys are generally recognized to be less advanced developmentally in small motor skills and the ability to concentrate on quiet tasks than girls at this age. Often they are still struggling with holding a pencil properly, making it difficult for them to form letters.

Much of the research comparing young kindergartners—aged less than 5 years, 3 months—to older ones about 6 years of age supports the view that the older child in a class will fare better academically and psychologically in later years. Studies comparing these two age groups have found that older children are more likely to receive above-average grades and above-average scores on achievement tests than younger children in the class. The younger children are more likely to have failed at least one grade in their school career and to have been referred for learning disability tests by their teachers. Some studies of long-term effects suggest that the academic problems experienced by bright but immature kindergartners persist into young adulthood.[8]

Some schools have set up special "transition" classes in the year before or after kindergarten for children they feel are not ready for the next level. Testing of kindergartners has become common, and in states like California and Minnesota, examinations determine whether children are ready to enter or exit from kindergarten.

The whole spectrum of responses to today's demanding kindergarten has come under attack from some educators as a sign that the schools are unwilling to educate children at their own level—even their beginning level. [In]...November [1987] a group of early childhood educators from 35 states, the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, condemned as "unacceptable" the school trends toward preschool testing, delayed entrance and transition classes. All of these approaches, the 50-member association said, are subtle forms of keeping children back, known as "retention."

"Children who have been retained demonstrate more social regression, display more behavior problems, suffer stress in connection with being retained, and more frequently leave high school without graduating," the association said in a statement. Although children who delay entering kindergarten by one year often fare well in school in the early years, those effects usually wear off by the end of elementary school, said the association's immediate past president, Harriet A. Egertson. Policies aimed at testing children for kindergarten, said Egertson, "discriminate against disadvantaged kids and particularly boys." Low-income children, who tend to perform the worst on such tests, are also the children who are most in need of the preschool experience yet the least likely to be able to afford it, Egertson and other critics of testing contend. Finally, the probability that a child will be misplaced based on several widely used tests is 50 percent, "the same odds as flipping a coin," the association said.

In California, a Task Force on School Readiness, appointed by the State Department of Education, has recommended that the school system eliminate entrance and exit tests for its prekindergarten, kindergarten and first-grade students and instead overhaul the curriculum toward a developmental orientation for all three years, according to task force Co-Chair Carollee Howes.

"It's silly," says the principal association's Sava. "What are you going to test these children for—to see if they're ready to accept the teacher-driven curriculum?"

Defenders of testing for kindergartners say it helps them to catch children with potential learning problems early. For four years, the Minneapolis public school system has been testing kindergarten children in the spring to see if they are ready for first grade. If they fail the test they are put into transition kindergartens. Last spring 11.4 percent of Minneapolis' kindergarten graduates went into transition classes. More than 70 percent of the students in those classes are from minority groups; the school system as a whole is 27 percent Black and 16 percent American Indian, Asian or Hispanic.

The program's coordinator, Ken Rustad, defended the system, saying, "If you've got a kid in seventh grade, it's more difficult to teach reading skills he's lost all the way along the line."[9]

Another response to the transition-class trend is to start children on a reading method that works in kindergarten, before they are examined. Martin, author of the "Writing to Read" program, asserts his program has kept hundreds of kindergartners from transition classes by successfully teaching them to read. "I know of nothing that brands a child as defective as much as the invention of this halfway house," Martin says of the new transition classes.

Perhaps the most disturbing outcome of increasingly demanding curricula is to classify large numbers of children as suffering from "learning disabilities," thus consigning them at an early age to special classes away from their peers and possibly to a career of failure in school. In *The Learning Mystique: A Critical Look at 'Learning Disabilities,'* Gerald Coles, a clinical psychiatrist at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, challenges the "learning-disability" label that has been placed on millions of school children. "Most of the differences in brain activity found between normal and disabled learners are just that—differences. They are simply biological distinctions that might be found between any two groups of people with different abilities." Schools, instead of responding to the individual needs of students by modifying their expectations, Coles charges, have contributed to the learning-disability diagnosis by

School Entrance Age Dates

States marked with a check (✓) have rolled back entrance age dates since 1975

State	Kindergarten [for age 5]	1st Grade [for age 6]
Alabama	Oct. 1	Oct. 1
Alaska	Nov. 2	Nov. 2
✓ Arizona	Sept. 1	Sept. 1
✓ Arkansas	Oct. 1	Oct. 1
California	Dec. 1	Dec. 1
Colorado	local option	local option
Connecticut	Jan. 1	Jan. 1
Delaware	Jan. 1	Jan. 1
✓ Florida	Sept. 1	Jan. 1
✓ Georgia	Sept. 1	Sept. 1
Hawaii	Dec. 31	Dec. 31
Idaho	Oct. 15	Oct. 15
✓ Illinois	Sept. 1	Sept. 1
Indiana	local option	local option
Iowa	Sept. 15	Sept. 15
Kansas	Sept. 1	Sept. 1
✓ Kentucky	Oct. 1	Oct. 1
Louisiana	Dec. 31	Dec. 31
Maine	Oct. 15	Oct. 15
Maryland	Dec. 31	Dec. 31
Massachusetts	local option	local option
Michigan	Dec. 1	Dec. 1
Minnesota	Sept. 1	Sept. 1
✓ Mississippi	Sept. 1	Sept. 1
✓ Missouri	June 30	June 30
✓ Montana	Sept. 10	Sept. 10
Nebraska	Oct. 15	Oct. 15
✓ Nevada	Sept. 30	Sept. 30
New Hampshire	not required	Sept. 30
New Jersey	Oct. 1	Oct. 1
New Mexico	Sept. 1	Sept. 1
New York	Dec. 1*	no date
✓ North Carolina	Oct. 16	Oct. 16
✓ North Dakota	Aug. 31	Aug. 31
Ohio	Sept. 30	Sept. 30
✓ Oklahoma	Sept. 1	Sept. 1
✓ Oregon	Sept. 1	Sept. 1
Pennsylvania	local option	local option
Rhode Island	Dec. 31	Dec. 31
South Carolina	Nov. 1	Nov. 1
✓ South Dakota	Sept. 1	Sept. 1
✓ Tennessee	Oct. 31	Oct. 31
Texas	Sept. 1	Sept. 1
✓ Utah	Sept. 1	Sept. 1
Vermont	local option**	local option**
✓ Virginia	Sept. 30	Sept. 30
✓ Washington	Aug. 31	Aug. 31
Washington, D.C.	Dec. 31	Dec. 31
✓ West Virginia	Sept. 1	Sept. 1
✓ Wisconsin	Sept. 1	Sept. 1
Wyoming	Sept. 15	Sept. 15

* Local districts deviate

** Most use Dec. 31

Source: James K. Uphoff, Wright State University

setting their curricula at a higher level than they should.

On the positive side of this trend, some say, is the ability of improved diagnostic techniques to catch learning problems at an early age, thus preventing serious academic problems later on.

There Is No Easy Way to Find the 'Best' Preschool

All parents want the best for their children. The problem comes in deciding what really is best. There are so many conflicting theories, and within each approach different techniques are used. Often, asking experts doesn't help because they all seem to be committed to their own theories and steer their advice accordingly.

Nevertheless, the quest for a good preschool may not be as hopeless as it might seem at first blush. It is important to remember that many schools are a combination of different theories and approaches. "Writing to Read" takes one hour out of each day. For a typical kindergartner enrolled in a full-day, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. program, the other five hours of his day tend to be filled with more relaxed activities: block-playing, outdoor play and story time. (In a half-day, three-hour program, it plays a more dominant role, of course.) Similarly, the controversial direct-instruction technique typically takes 30 minutes to an hour out of a six-hour kindergarten day that is also filled with many of the free-play activities supported by developmentalists. Children react quite differently to these varied activities and approaches, depending on their personalities. Often, a teacher who is sensitive to the individual student's response can make the difference in how the teaching technique is perceived by the child.

Indeed, that may point to the key element in selecting a preschool. Says Karen Strimple, the director of an avowedly developmental preschool in Washington, D.C.: "The most important thing at any school is the teacher." And Seattle direct-instruction director Nielsen agrees: "I feel that no matter what kind of program you use, what creates success is the teacher. You can have crummy High/Scope teachers and crummy direct-instruction teachers—and the best in both, too."

Notes

[1]W. Norton Grubb, "Young Children Face the States: Issues and Options for Early Childhood Programs," prepared for the Center for Policy Research in Education, Department of Education, May 1987.

[2]Lawrence J. Schweinhart et al., "A Report on the High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study: Consequences of Three Preschool Curriculum Models Through Age 15," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, No. 1 (1986), pp. 15-45.

[3]Louise Bates Ames, *Don't Push Your Preschooler* (1974), p. 164.

[4]See Bettye M. Caldwell, "The Challenge of the Third-Grade Slump," *Principal*, May 1987, pp. 10-14.

[5]See "The Impact of Head Start on Children, Families and Communities," Prepared for the Head Start Bureau, Department of Health and Human Services, June 1985.

[6]John R. Berrueta-Clement et al., "Changed Lives: The Effects of the Perry Preschool Program on Youths Through Age 19," High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1984.

[7]Donald E. Pierson et al., "A School-Based Program from Infancy to Kindergarten for Children and Their Parents," *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, April 1984.

[8]James K. Uphoff and June Gilmore, "Pupil Age at School Entrance—How Many Are Ready for Success?", *Educational Leadership*, September 1985, pp. 86-90.

[9]See Joseph Berger, "Testing 5-Year-Olds: Is New York the Next Stop?", *The New York Times*, Jan. 13, 1988, p. B6.

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Staff Characteristics: Kindergartens — November 1985

State	Compulsory Age	Kindergarten Entrance Age	District Offering	Pupil Attendance
Alabama	7	5 on/before 10/1	P	P
Alaska	7	(1)	P	P
American Samoa	6	(2)	—	—
Arizona	8	5 by 9/1	M	P
Arkansas	7	5 on/before 10/1	M	P
California	6	(3)	P	P
Colorado	7	5 (cut-off date LEA option)	M	P
Connecticut	7	5 by 1/1	M	P
Delaware	5	5 by 1/1	M	M
Dist. of Columbia	7	5 by 12/31	P	P
Florida	6	5 by 9/1	M	M (4)
Georgia	7	5 by 9/1	P (5)	P
Hawaii	6	4 yr. 6 mo. to 5 yr. 6 mo. if 5 by 12/31	P	P
Idaho	7	5 by 10/15	P	P
Illinois	7	5 on/before 11/1 (1986-87); 10/1 (1987-88); 9/1 (1988-89)	M (6)	P
Indiana	7	5 (cut-off date LEA option)	M (eff. 1984)	P
Iowa	7	5 on/before 9/15	M	P
Kansas	7	5 on/before 9/1	P	P
Kentucky	6	5 on/before 10/1	M	P (7)
Louisiana	7	1 year younger than age for 1st grade	M	M (8)
Maine	7	5 on/before 10/15	M	M
Maryland	6	5 by 12/31	M	P
Massachusetts	6	LEA option	M	P
Michigan	6	5 by 12/1	P	P
Minnesota	7	5 by 9/1	M	P
Mississippi	6	5 as of 9/1	M (9)	P
Missouri	7	5 as of 9/1; 8/1 in 1986 and 7/1 in 1987	P	P
Montana	7	5 on/before 9/10	P	P
Nebraska	7	5 by 10/15	P (10)	P
Nevada	7	5 by 9/30	P	P
New Hampshire	6	5 (cut-off date LEA option)	P	P
New Jersey	6	4 to 6 (LEA option)	P	P
New Mexico	6	5 by 9/1	M	P
New York	6	5 by 12/1	M	P
North Carolina	7	5 on/before 10/16	M	P
North Dakota (11)	7	5 as of 8/31	P	P
Ohio	6	5 on/before 9/30	M	P
Oklahoma	7	5 on/before 9/1	M	P
Oregon (12)	7	5 by 11/15	P	P
Pennsylvania	8	5 by 9/1 through 1/1 (LEA option)	P	P
Puerto Rico	6	5 by 8/1	P	P
Rhode Island	7	5 on/before 12/31	M	P
South Carolina	6	5 on/before 11/1	M	M (13)
South Dakota	7	5 by 9/1	P	P
Tennessee	7	5 on/before 9/30	M	P
Texas	7	5 by 9/1	M	P
Utah	6	5 on/before 9/30	P	P
Vermont	7	5 (cut-off date LEA option)	M (14)	P
Virgin Islands	4 1/2	4 1/2	M	M
Virginia	5	5 by 9/30	M	P (15)
Washington	8	5 on/before midnight 8/31 (14)	M (16)	P
West Virginia	6	5 prior to 9/1	M	P (17)
Wisconsin	6	5 by 9/1	M	P
Wyoming	7	5 by 9/15	P	P

P = permission; M = mandatory.

Compiled by: ECS Clearinghouse.

Notes

(1) In Alaska, a child who is 6 years old or becomes 6 on/before Nov. 2 can enter kindergarten. There is no minimal age when a child can be refused entrance. Most enter by 5 years.

(2) American Samoa does not have kindergarten in elementary schools. Early Childhood Education Program Centers are established in villages; free services are provided to 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds.

(3) California entrance age is 4 yrs., 9 mos. on/before 9/1 for first term or 4 yrs., 9 mos. on/before 2/1 for second.

(4) In Florida, the compulsory school age is 6; however, successful completion of kindergarten is mandatory. If not successfully completed, a child may be older than 6 when entering first grade.

(5) Kindergarten becomes mandatory in Georgia with the 1987-88 academic year.

(6) Illinois permits school districts to offer full-day kindergarten programs and receive full state aid, beginning in fall 1985-86.

(7) Attendance became prerequisite for first grade in Kentucky in 1985 academic year.

(8) Louisiana specifies mandatory half-day attendance or test for first-grade readiness.

(9) Mississippi districts are required to offer kindergarten as of the 1986-87 academic year.

(10) Kindergarten is required for accreditation in Nebraska. All LEAs offer.

(11) In North Dakota, children with special talents/abilities born between 9/1 and 12/31 can be enrolled early, upon passing SDE-approved screening tests.

(12) Kindergarten will be mandatory in Oregon beginning in 1989. The entrance age will be changed to 5 years by 9/1 with the 1987-88 academic year. Interim change to 5 by 10/1 applies by 1986-87 year.

(13) The South Carolina Education Improvement Act of 1984 specifies that "5-year-olds shall attend kindergarten" but parents may obtain a waiver from this requirement.

(14) Every district must provide publicly funded kindergarten for their students by 7/1/88.

(15) The compulsory school age in Virginia is 5 years; however, kindergarten attendance is permissive, as a parent(s) can request that a child wait until age 6 to enter school.

(16) LEAs in Washington can permit early entrance up to 3 months.

(17) Kindergarten attendance in West Virginia is permissive; however, prior to entrance into the first grade each child must successfully complete kindergarten. Under extraordinary circumstances a child may pass a county school board approved readiness test in lieu of kindergarten attendance.

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